



Metaphysical Exposition in Isvarakrishna's Samkhya-Karika

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Abstract

Sāṃkhya philosophy on evolution have very profound and compact theory, compared to any other metaphysical concepts. The system advocates an ontological dualism of Prakṛti and Puruṣa [individual souls]. It believes in the evolution of the cosmos including matter, life and mind out of the eternal Prakṛti to serve the ends of an infinite number of individual souls. However, metaphysical exposition on inactive agent producing conscious things has become controversial issue. This paper presents the metaphysical concepts in Sāṃkhyakārikā

Keywords: Prakṛti, Sāṃkhya, Puruṣa, Metaphysical

Sāṃkhya Metaphysics

Sāṃkhya is very fond of numbers, and in its classical form it is the system of 25 realities [tattvas]. In standard categories it is a dualism of Puruṣa [person] and Prakṛti [nature]; but Prakṛti has two basic forms, vyakta, “manifest,” and avyakta, “un-manifest,” so there are three basic principles. Puruṣa and the avyakta are the first two tattvas; the remaining twenty-three from intellect to the elements belong to the manifest nature. The relation of the un-manifest and manifest nature is somewhat vague, perhaps later it is understood as a cosmological relation; the un-manifest was the initial state of Prakṛti, where the guṇas are in equilibrium. Due to the effect of the Puruṣa(s), this changed and evolved the manifold universe that we see, the manifest. This view nicely conforms to the standard Hindu image of cosmic cycles of creation and destruction; but it is problematic logically [without supposing God] and Īśvarakṛṣṇa without directly opposing, it does not seem to accept it. Kārikā says that we do not grasp the un-manifest because it is subtle, not because it does not exist; and that implies that it exists also at present, as an imperceptible homogenous substrate of the world, (Virupakshananda, 1995). It is a notable feature of Sāṃkhya that its dualism is somewhat unbalanced: if we dropped Puruṣa from the picture, we would still have a fairly complete picture of the world, as Prakṛti is not inert, mechanical matter but is a living, creative principle that has all the resources to produce from itself the human mind and intellect. Sāṃkhya thus, looks like a full materialist account of the world, with the passive, unchanging principle of consciousness added almost as an afterthought.

Puruṣa

The first tattva [reality], the Sāṃkhya system holds that all sentient beings are embodied Puruṣa(s). In Sāṃkhyakārikā, “Puruṣa” is metaphorically considered to be masculine, but unlike our concept of virility it is absolutely inactive. It is pure consciousness [conscious subject], uncaused, eternal, all-pervasive, independent self-sustaining, enjoys and witnesses Prakṛti's activities, but does not cause them (devoid of the guṇas, therefore inactive and unable to produce). It cannot directly have perceived and known only from inference as it is essentially private for every sentient being, being their true self. Its existence can be proof through five arguments; (1) All complex structures serve an external purpose (bed is for somebody to lie on, so the whole complex system of nature must also serve something different from it). (2) The three guṇas give an exhaustive explanation of material phenomena, but we find non-material cause in sentient beings, which is the Puruṣa. (3) The coordinated activity of all the parts of a human prove that there is something supervising it (in dead body parts fall apart). (4) We have immediate awareness of ourselves as conscious beings, the experiencing self is the Puruṣa. (5) The separation of soul and matter, would be impossible without their being separate Puruṣa(s) to be liberated. Kārikā also adduces three arguments in existence of separate puruṣa (individual); (1) Birth, death and the personalities of individuals are determined by their karma. (2) If there were one Puruṣa, all bodies should be identical or at least indistinguishable for the function of the self. But it is clearly not so proving plurality of distinct Puruṣa(s). (3) We would all experience the same things if we have only one Puruṣa, but our experiences are inherently diverse and private.

In time, it became difficult to follow most of the arguments on existence of Puruṣa under the influence of the concept of the absolutely unchanging and quality-less spiritual essence elaborated in Vedānta philosophy. Sāṃkhyakārikā, however, an inactivity of the Puruṣa does not seem to involve absolute incapability for change; the same word is used also for the un-manifest nature, the substrate of all material manifestations. Arguably, it means only inability to move in space or to have mechanical effect. It is clear from the above arguments, Puruṣa is the determinative factor of our actions and that presupposes its changes in time, otherwise we would always do the same thing. Some of the modern scholars proposed multiplicity of Puruṣa(s) be understood as essentially epistemological in nature and ontologically irrelevant.

Prakṛti

Prakṛti is female gendered, “she” in Sāṃkhya, probably metaphorical. In its various forms, contrasts as being productive, unconscious, objective (knowable as an object), not irreducibly atomic, and comprised of three guṇas. The Prakṛti, nature and productive substance is actually used in three related but different senses in kārikā. (1) Sometimes it is a synonym for the second tattva, “mūla-prakṛti” [root-nature], “avyakta” [the un-manifest] or “pradhāna” [the principal]. (2) Sometimes it is paired with “vikṛti” (modification), sensed as source [only unmanifest is Prakṛti]. An intellect, ego and five sense qualities are both prakṛtis and vikṛtis which produces set of eight prakṛtis. The remaining sixteen tattvas are only vikṛtis while the first tattva, puruṣa is neither prakṛti nor vikṛti. (3) Both the manifest and the un-manifest nature.

Three Guṇas

Sāṃkhya analyzes manifest Prakṛti, the world, both physical and mental into three omnipresent aspects (guṇas). Guṇa variously means a thread, subordinate component, quality or virtue. “Materially existent is constituent of three attributes, is non-distinguishable, objective, common, non-intelligent and prolific. So also is the primordial Nature. The spirit is the reserver of both of them and yet is similar in some respect”, (Virupakshananda, 1995). In every phenomenon, all the three guṇas are present, they are not spatially or temporally delimited and do not have separate individuality. They are generally characterized as the real actors, even in mental phenomena such as cognition. In other words, they compete but also cooperate for an external purpose like the parts of a lamp [wick, oil and flam]. The first sattva Guṇa means sat-ness, where the participle “sat” means being, existent, real and often used for entity, existence, essence and intelligence. It is light [not heavy]. Its essence is affection and illuminating. “Rajas,” means atmosphere, mist, dust and supportive like a column but also mobile like water. Its essence is aversion and brings into motion and its activity is seizing. “Tamas,” means darkness, is heavy and covering. Its essence is despair, its purpose is holding back, and its activity is preservation.

Metaphysical Causality

In Sāṃkhyakārikā, causality is the external, objective counterpart of the intellectual process of inference. The world as we see, it is an effect of its fundamental causes, which are only known through their effects and in conjunction with a proper understanding of causation. The Sāṃkhya conceives causality, typically regarded as a relation between events, it rather consists in the origin of a thing. The standard example of the causal relationship is, of the potter making a pot from clay, where the cause par excellence is taken to be the clay, and its analysis of causation is called sat-kārya-vāda, or literally the “existent effect theory”, which opposes the view taken by the Nyāya philosophy. Perhaps sat-kārya is better rendered as “the effect of existent (causes)”; it stands for a moderate form of determinism. In the commentaries it is normally explained as the view that an effect already exists in its cause prior to its production. The theory states that there is nothing absolutely new in the product, everything in it was determined by its causes, (Kelth, 1996).

The Kārikā exposed five considerations being used in argument for the sat-kārya-vād; (a) the nonexistent cannot produce anything (given the assumed definition of “existence” as the ability to have some effect). (b) When producing a specific thing, we always need a specific substance as material cause (such as the clay for a pot). (c) Otherwise, everything would come into being from anything. (d) The creative agent (the efficient cause) produces only what it can, not anything (a potter cannot make jewelry). (e) The effect is essentially identical with its material cause, and so it has many of its qualities [a pot is still clay, and thus consists of the primary attributes of clay]. This last argument is utilized to determine the basic attributes of the imperceptible metaphysical causes of the empirical world, the substrate must have the same fundamental attributes and abilities as the manifest world.

Evolution [Humanity and The World]

Sāṃkhya exhibits, creation consists in the conjunction of the two categories of Prakṛti and puruṣa(s). On conjunction, the puruṣa is embodied in the world appearing to be the agent, Prakṛti on other hand seems to be

conscious [animated by puruṣa]. The relation between a puruṣa and Prakṛti in Sāṃkhyakārikā are like two men [a lame man and a blind man] lost in the wilderness, the one without the power of sight (Prakṛti) carrying the cripple [puruṣa] that can navigate the wild. Their purpose is twofold: (1) the puruṣa desires experience (without blind nature, unable to have experiences). (2) Both Prakṛti and puruṣa desire liberation [both blind and the lame desire to make their way home and part ways].

The nature of the puruṣa–prakṛti connection is prima facie problematic [inactive soul influence matter and unintelligent substance serving somebody’s purpose]. Puruṣa is said to illuminate Prakṛti, and Prakṛti reflects the nature of puruṣa, thus solving the problem of how Prakṛti and puruṣa can seemingly borrow each-others properties without affecting each-others essential state. In consequence of conjunction, Prakṛti evolves many forms; twenty-three tattvas [realities] of manifest Prakṛti. The character of this evolution is somewhat vague considering the cosmological evolution of micro and macro. Īśvarakṛṣṇa says, the central mechanism of evolution is the complicated interaction of the guṇas, in which manifestations of nature the dominance of the guṇas varies covering everything. The actual order of evolution is as follows: from root-nature first appears intellect [buddhi]; from it, ego [ahaṃkāra]; from it the eleven powers [indriya] and the five sensibilia [tanmātra]; and from the tanmātras the elements [bhūta]. In Kārikā, Puruṣa is connected directly only to the intellect, and the latter does all cognitions, mediates all experiences for it ranging from an ego or ahaṃkāra with sattvic dominance leading to formation of eleven powers [indriya] and mind [manas]. Intellect, ego and mind together constitute the antaḥ-karaṇa [internal organ] or material psyche, while the other indriyas collectively are called the external organ. The internal organ as an inseparable unit is the principle of life [prāṇa]. The material elements are derived from the gross, tamas-ic aspect of the ego being called as tanmātras. These in turn yield the elements [bhūta, mahābhūta].

Human beings are a compound of all these. At death we lose the body made up of the five gross elements; the rest [from intellect down to the tanmātra-s] make up the transmigrating entity, called liṅga or liṅga-śarīra [sign-body], often known in English translations as the “subtle body”. The puruṣa itself does not transmigrate; it only watches. Transmigration is compared to an actor putting on different clothes and taking up many roles; it is determined by the law of [efficient] cause and effect, known also as the law of karma [action]. The world, “from the creator god Brahmā down to a blade of glass” is just a compound of such embodied liṅga-śarīra-s. The gods are of eight kinds; animals are of five kinds and humans, significantly, belongs to one group only [suggesting an egalitarianism with respect to humans]. Of course, the gods of Sāṃkhya, they are just extra-long-lived, perhaps very powerful beings within the empirical world, themselves compounds of matter and soul.

Conclusion

Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s Sāṃkhyakārikā exhibits an entity on evolutionary theory based on its relationship between Puruṣa and Prakṛiti [being the sole prime root of nature]. The cause and effect theory of Sāṃkhy is called Satkārya-vāda, theory of existent causes, and holds that nothing can really be created from or destroyed into nothingness. All evolution is simply the transformation of primal nature from one form to another, (Majumdar, 1925). The evolution takes place because of the contact between Prakṛti and the puruṣa. Evolution can take place through the activity of Prakṛti only when the energy of Prakṛti is conjoined with puruṣa although their natures are so different. Yet, causation is not different from an effect, it is present in and through all.

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